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SUBJECT: DRUZE COMMUNITY FEEDBACK: ARSLAN ADVISOR ON JUMBLATT

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (C) Opposition Druze leader Talal Arslan was not surprised by majority Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's apparent move away from the majority March 14 coalition in recent days, according to Arslan advisor Saleem Hamadeh, although he added that Jumblatt was still supporting Saad Hariri. Jumblatt was seeking to repair his historically contentious relationship with Syria and would only have made his statements with Syrian concurrence, Hamadeh believed. Arslan's Christian ally, Michel Aoun, was resisting Arslan's demands for a cabinet seat for either himself or his party. Once the cabinet is formed, if Arslan is not offered a seat, he will reconsider his parliamentary alliance with Aoun. However, on regional matters, Arslan's group will continue to vote with the opposition, Hamadeh reported. Jumblatt's statements have not appeared to hurt his stature in the Druze community, but Syria and its Lebanese allies are prepared to use Jumblatt's repositioning for their own gain. End summary and comment.

JUMBLATT COZIES UP TO SYRIA

¶2. (C) Opposition Druze leader Talal Arslan's advisor Saleem Hamadeh told Poloff August 13 Arslan was "not at all surprised" that majority Druze leader Walid Jumblatt had positioned himself away from the majority March 14 coalition, although Jumblatt was still supporting Saad Hariri, Hamadeh said. He added that following the May 2008 crisis, Jumblatt and Arslan reconciled to preserve "the security of the mountain" (referring to the Druze areas where they both have constituencies). At that time, Jumblatt confided to Arslan that he wanted to repair his historically contentious relationship with the Syrians, which the Syrians once described to Arslan by saying, "Evil would enter heaven before Jumblatt would enter Syria!"

¶3. (C) Hamadeh surmised that Jumblatt only made his statements on August 2 after the Syrians had agreed to "entertain" Jumblatt. For Syria, having Jumblatt move away from March 14 was "enough," even if he did not join the

opposition, he concluded. For Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri the worst-case scenario would be if Jumblatt actually held a meeting with Michel Aoun, he added. Arslan, on the other hand, maintains a warm, personal relationship with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his family, as does political ally Suleiman Franjieh, and to a lesser extent opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun, Hamadeh said. Jumblatt's closest interlocutor with Syria is caretaker Druze Minister of Transport and Public Works Ghazi Aridi, a member of Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, and not fellow Druze Wiam Wahhab (who is reputed for his extensive connections with the Syrian intelligence services), he said.

AOUN BALKS AT ARSLAN'S
DEMAND FOR CABINET SEAT

¶4. (C) On cabinet negotiations, Hamadeh said Arslan's alliance with Christian leader Michel Aoun's parliamentary bloc could be in jeopardy if Aoun refuses to offer a cabinet seat to his Druze ally. Arslan, the current caretaker Minister of Youth and Sport, was insisting that, at a minimum, at least one of the cabinet seats should be reserved for his party, if not himself. He proposed Greek Orthodox party member MP Marwan Abu Fadel, as the preferred choice if Aoun did not wish to cede one of the opposition's ten cabinet seats to a Druze. (Note: Hamadeh assumed that the 15-10-5 (majority-opposition-Presidential bloc) cabinet formula currently being discussed was final. End note.) Jumblatt, who previously called publicly for Arslan to be given a cabinet position from the opposition's quota, visited Arslan

BEIRUT 00000913 002 OF 002

the evening of August 10 and reaffirmed that he would support Arslan for a cabinet seat, Hamadeh reported, but it would be up to Arslan "to work it out" with Aoun.

¶5. (C) According to Hamadeh, Aoun was insisting that of the 10 ministers for the opposition, five should be Maronite and five should be Shia to appease Hizballah, Aoun's larger, more powerful ally. Hamadeh expected that Aoun would not budge on his demand that Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri accept Aoun's son-in-law, caretaker Minister of Telecommunications Gebran Bassil, as a cabinet minister, but might consider negotiating the portfolio Bassil could take. (Note: Hariri is apparently holding to his condition that candidates who lost their parliamentary electoral races would not be considered for a cabinet post. Bassil lost his parliamentary race in Batroun. End note.)

ARSLAN'S PARTY WILL VOTE
WITH HIZBALLAH ON REGIONAL ISSUES

¶6. (C) Hamadeh explained that Arslan's party preferred to be in an "equi-distant" position from others, including allies Michel Aoun and Hizballah. However, on matters of regional interest, especially vis-a-vis Israel or security, the party would vote with the opposition. On domestic issues, the position would depend on the issue, Hamadeh said.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) There are approximately 150,000 Druze in Lebanon. Hamadeh argued that because of Jumblatt, the Druze receive far more attention and importance than their numbers would otherwise merit. Jumblatt's latest statements have caused a nervous frenzy for the majority March 14 coalition, especially PM-designate Hariri, but for the rest of the Druze and Syria's allies, Jumblatt's machinations increase his bargaining power. For Arslan, his alliance with the opposition bloc remains strong, but the relationship with Michel Aoun is under strain. If Arslan withdraws from Aoun's parliamentary bloc, Aoun's claims of inclusion with other Lebanese confessions is diminished -- although not

catastrophic -- without the inclusion of some Druze.

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